

# A Church–State Partnership in Defense of the Puritan National Covenant

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The Puritans left England in 1629 to create a New Jerusalem across the Atlantic in the largely unexplored and unsettled area that became the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Thousands of their fellow Calvinists joined them over the next few decades as they created a Godly state where they could worship according to their religious dictates. What sustained the colony through its hardships was a belief that they were God's chosen people.

The Calvinists attributed all things good or bad to God's happiness or displeasure with them. This belief in a national covenant permeated all aspects of colonial governance, religion, and society. This agreement with God was the cornerstone of a Puritan civil religion that defined and unified the state, legitimized the government, and promoted a shared belief system among the people. The national covenant was so important that the Puritans codified this concept within their legal and religious documents.

Although church and state were considered separate pillars within the Puritan community, the two groups formed a partnership that was crucial to defining and preserving the covenant. The civil and religious authorities were constantly on the alert for people, events, or actions that could disrupt their divine agreement. Opponents were banished, wars explained, and difficult decisions made in the name of upholding the holy pact.

The Puritans employed a number of tactics to maintain their national covenant. The civil authorities used the legal system to enact and enforce biblically based ordinances that governed individual and communal behavior. They also exercised their authority

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to call synods of the clergy and laity to resolve religious disputes that threatened to undermine colonial unity.

Whereas the civil leaders ensured legal compliance with the covenant, the clergy gave meaning to the sacred agreement. The ministers were the intermediaries between God and the people. They were responsible for interpreting natural calamities and events and, when necessary, recommending remedies. These ongoing efforts to appease God resulted in a dynamic covenant that contributed to the long-term stability of the colony.

## Massachusetts Bay Colony

From its inception in 1630 until it lost its royal charter in 1684, the colony was largely a self-governing territory comprised of a people committed to advancing a religious-based society. The Puritans believed in an ascetic, primitive form of Christianity without bishops, ornate churches, or predetermined liturgies. The Bible was the foundation of their religion and daily existence. Persecuted by the established Anglican Church in England, the Puritans immigrated to the New World seeking the freedom to practice their faith.

Although religion was central to the governance of Massachusetts, it was not a theocracy. As Calvinists, the Puritans shared the Geneva reformer's belief that "the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things very widely separated."<sup>1</sup> Just as the ministers were apostles sent by God to preach the Gospel, the civil authorities were given "a commission from God" and "invested with divine authority" to "represent the person of God."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the civil authorities were to enact and enforce the law, whereas the clergy were to preach the Good News and meet the spiritual needs of their flock.

Civil authority within Massachusetts was divided between the executive branch represented by the governor and the legislative and judicial branches embodied by the General Court. The General Court was a bicameral legislature. The court was comprised of an Upper Chamber of the Council of Assistants, who were elected colony-wide, and a Lower Chamber House of Deputies, who were selected by the townspeople to represent local interests.<sup>3</sup> Members of the Council of Assistants also served as judicial officers within the colony and were given the additional title of magistrate. The magistrates were frequently referenced in Puritan sermons as

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1. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (1581; reprint, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2009), 970.

2. *Ibid.*, 703, 970.

3. In many ways, the General Court resembled the US Congress with the Council of Assistants similar to the Senate and the House of Deputies similar to the House of Representatives.

the ordained enforcers of God's laws on Earth and were powerful political actors within the Bay colony.

The congregational churches in Massachusetts were unique because they had no formal governing structure. Each minister was elected or removed by his congregation. Each congregation was independent from all other Puritan churches. In the absence of bishops or a governing assembly, the Puritan clergy created a consociation to coordinate their activities, share experiences, and develop common strategies for protecting their flocks. Coordination among the reformed clergy helped maintain unity among the ministry and strengthened them as a political force within the commonwealth.

Although all Puritans were required to attend church services, not everyone was a church member. To become a member, an individual had to demonstrate to the clergy and church elders that they had a personal experience that led them to Christ and they lived in accordance with biblical principles. Once individuals achieved full church membership, they were eligible to run and vote for church and colonial offices.<sup>4</sup> Nonmembers were denied the right to vote. Because of this voting restriction, those who selected ministers and colonial officers were often the most supportive of maintaining a Godly state. Massachusetts also barred the clergy from holding public office, thus recognizing the distinct spheres of the two tables.

## The Covenant

Covenant theology was at the heart of Puritanism. Initially, God offered salvation to humans if they obeyed his moral laws. Adam violated this agreement, known as the Covenant of Works, when he ate the forbidden apple given to him by Eve. God then provided humans with a new means of redemption, the Covenant of Grace. This covenant, granted to Abraham and his ancestors and fulfilled by Jesus, made salvation a gift from God that could not be earned. The Covenant of Works was not eliminated, but subsumed into this new agreement. Although no earthly works could get a person into heaven, it was assumed that a saved person would do good deeds as a follower of Christ.<sup>5</sup>

The Puritans believed that God could also enter into public covenants with his people.<sup>6</sup> Churches and towns throughout

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4. Only men in "full communion" with the church were able to run for office or vote in church and colonial elections.

5. John Witte Jr., *The Reformation of Rights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 290–91; Bruce C. Daniels, *New England Nation: The Country the Puritans Built* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 100–101.

6. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 21.

Massachusetts routinely entered into covenants that “gave boundaries to the Puritan’s vertical relationship with God and his horizontal relationship with his neighbor.”<sup>7</sup> The colony also initiated a national covenant between the entire community and God. The logic behind entering these covenants was clear, “whether applied to individuals or to nations: one enters into the bond, he sins, and is afflicted, according to the explicit terms; he confesses his sin, the affliction is removed, he is restored to the covenant.”<sup>8</sup>

Although the national covenant would not affect an individual’s salvation, it could affect the well-being of the community. God could reward a society that obeyed his will by making it prosperous and safe and punish those that violated the holy pact by subjecting them to war, famine, or ruin.<sup>9</sup> Thus, it was important that group leaders continuously monitor and interpret the signs to ensure that God was pleased with them and, if He was not, identify and implement changes to appease Him. Unlike personal salvation, “national covenants required good works on the part of the citizens.”<sup>10</sup>

From the outset, the Puritans used the concept of a national covenant as a means of unifying themselves. As the Puritans gathered in Southampton, England, to make their voyage to the New World, they were joined by their friend and compatriot John Cotton, who came to wish them well on their forthcoming adventure. Cotton, once an up-and-coming minister within the established Anglican Church, was out of favor with authorities because he now espoused Puritan beliefs. When the Puritans departed, Cotton gave a sermon outlining the meaning of their spiritual journey.

In his remarks, Cotton described their journey as divinely inspired. He asserted that God would provide them a resting place as he did the Hebrews when they escaped the tyranny of the pharaoh. Cotton quoted the prophet Samuel: “Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel and I will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more.”<sup>11</sup> In this promised land, Cotton asserted the emigrants would succeed and prosper as long as they remained faithful to their covenant with God. “If you rebel against God, the same God that planted

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7. David A. Weir, *Early New England: A Covenanted Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2005), 221.

8. Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 197.

9. *Ibid.*, 22.

10. Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 24.

11. John Cotton, “Gods Promise to His Plantation (1630),” in *The Kingdom, the Power, & the Glory: The Millennial Impulse in Early American Literature*, ed. Reiner Smolinsk (Dubuque: Kendall-Hunt Publishing, 1998), 3–4.

you will also root you out.”<sup>12</sup> However, if they abide by God’s plan “that what he hath planted, he will maintain.”<sup>13</sup>

This special relationship with God was further re-enforced in a sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” given by the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, John Winthrop, as he crossed the Atlantic with his coreligionists. Winthrop asserted:

[I]f the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission... if we shall neglect... these articles... the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us... and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.<sup>14</sup>

Cotton’s and Winthrop’s discourses to make Massachusetts a Godly paradise on Earth gave meaning to the Puritans’ trek to the New World. Such a belief gave comfort to the Puritans as they faced trials and tribulations, including adapting to different surroundings, dealing with unknown peoples, identifying a reliable food supply, and creating fortifications. This mission, to become a “city upon a hill,” sustained them in their new environment as they sought to inspire their Anglican counterparts to change their ways and follow the reformed faith.<sup>15</sup>

## Legal Code and Synods

Once established in the New World, the Puritans refined their national covenant to provide greater clarity on what was required of the colonists to maintain the contract. A consensus emerged among the colonists to use the colonial charter and legal code as the basis of the spiritual pact.<sup>16</sup> From the Puritan perspective, the “whole point of lawmaking was to promote public morality by translating God’s moral precepts into criminal statutes and regulations.”<sup>17</sup> This legalistic approach often resulted in Puritan leaders equating maintenance of the existing social order with preservation of the covenant.

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12. Ibid., 17.

13. Ibid., 20.

14. John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” in *Puritan Political Ideas 1558-1794*, ed. Edmund S. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 92.

15. Ibid., 93.

16. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 422-28.

17. Edgar J. McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England: Criminal Justice and Due Process 1620-1692* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 38.

The development of the legal code was an evolutionary process. In the mid-1630s, the General Court invited the newly arrived John Cotton to draft an initial governing document for the colony. In his "An Abstract or The Laws of New England as they are Now Established," Cotton outlined a code of moral conduct for the colony. Using the Ten Commandments as the basis for these recommendations, Cotton suggested harsh penalties for direct violations of God's ordinances. He proposed making blasphemy, the worshiping of graven images, and profaning the Sabbath all capital offenses.<sup>18</sup> Cotton proposed similar penalties for adultery and homosexual relations.<sup>19</sup>

Although not immediately enacted, Cotton's work served as the initial framework for the 1641 Massachusetts Body of Liberties, later revised and reapproved in 1647 as the colony's formal legal code. In addition to maintaining the moral prohibitions, the later version gave legal status to the Puritan claim of being the chosen people. The document further stated that God "was said to be amongst them or near to them because of His ordinances."<sup>20</sup> The inference was that Massachusetts needed to establish "laws according to the rules of His most holy word" if they were to maintain the covenant.<sup>21</sup> It was this obedience to "His holy ordinances" that distinguished Massachusetts and New England from the other colonies while contributing to their "divine protection and preservation."<sup>22</sup>

The Body of Liberties also described in more detail the collaborative relationship between church and state in governing the colony. The General Court stated:

This hath been no small privilege, and advantage to us in New England that our Churches and civil State have been planted, and grown up (like two twins) together...each do help and strengthen the other (the Churches the civil Authority, and the civil Authority the Churches) and so both prosper...without such emulation and contention for privileges or priority as proved the misery (if not ruin) of both in some other places.<sup>23</sup>

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18. John Cotton, *An Abstract or the Laws of New England* (London: Printed for F. Coules and W. Ley, 1641), 10-11.

19. *Ibid.*, 11.

20. "The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts," in *The Sacred Right of Conscience*, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009), 90.

21. *Ibid.*, 90.

22. Samuel Danforth, *A Brief Recognition of New-England's Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: S. G. and M. F., 1671), 18 and 22.

23. "The Laws and Liberties of Massachusetts," in Dreisbach and Hall, eds., *The Sacred Right of Conscience*, 90.

The church-state structure and relationship within the Massachusetts Bay Colony was “formed and settled in a way that seemed to assure for posterity the . . . maintenance of the Puritan system of belief.”<sup>24</sup>

Over the years, the state continued to enact laws urged by the clergy to address challenges to the social order. In the 1650s, Quaker missionaries entered Massachusetts seeking to undermine Puritanism by proselytizing, disrupting church services, and defying the civil authorities.<sup>25</sup> The colony banished these individuals from the settlement. Many continued to return. In response, the General Court passed legislation adding the return of banished Quakers to the list of capital offenses. “The magistrates as well as the ministers were convinced that to tolerate many religions in a state would destroy the peace of the churches and dissolve the continuity of the state.”<sup>26</sup> The message was clear—church and state would work together to preserve God’s promised land.

The General Court also ensured stability of the colony through the use of synods or meetings of the churches. A synod could be requested by the clergy, the civil government, or both. During the first fifty years of the Massachusetts colony, the most important synods dealt with issues affecting social order, such as challenges to clerical authority, church operations, congregational membership, and moral indifference. In each instance, the clergy and the General Court worked together to maintain unity and order within the colony.

### *Antinomian Controversy*

The first major synod was called to assist the colonial leaders with the Antinomian Controversy of 1636.<sup>27</sup> This crisis was instigated by Anne Hutchinson, a follower of John Cotton, who asserted that most Boston clergy were placing too much emphasis on the Covenant of Works as a means of salvation rather than relying upon God’s grace. This was a serious charge because salvation through good works was associated with popery and thus heresy. Mrs. Hutchinson asserted that internal guidance from the Holy Spirit was more

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24. George Lee Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1960), 63.

25. McManus, *Law and Liberty in Early New England: Criminal Justice and Due Process 1620–1692*, 115–16, 184.

26. Haskins, *Law and Authority in Early Massachusetts*, 51.

27. Antinomian was a term employed by the Puritans to describe advocates of the Covenant of Grace who believed that once a person was “saved” nothing they did could prevent them from going to heaven—even if they engaged in immoral behavior.

important to achieving eternal life with God than outward signs of conformity with New England religious practices.<sup>28</sup>

Mrs. Hutchinson's public accusations were viewed by the political and religious elite as a direct challenge to clerical authority and a threat to the stability of the colony. To stamp out this threat, the General Court convened a synod of the clergy to ensure unified opposition to her statements and actions among the independent churches. Once this was accomplished, the General Court conducted a trial of Mrs. Hutchinson, where she was brought before the assembly and charged with troubling "the peace of the commonwealth and churches" and speaking against the "honor of the churches and the ministers."<sup>29</sup> She was found guilty of these charges and banished from the colony. Social order was preserved.

### *Cambridge Synod*

The General Court convened the Cambridge synod in 1646 to address concerns the English Puritans would impose a Presbyterian governance model on New England churches if they won the English Civil War. Although English and New England Puritans shared similar theologies, their church structures were different. Under the Presbyterian model, district, regional, and national assemblies oversaw the local churches. In New England, the local church was independent of any governing body. The court hoped codifying the independence of the churches would dissuade England from trying to impose changes later that could undermine the existing order.

The Cambridge synod also specified the responsibilities of the local communities to the church. Each town was to have its own meeting house built with public funds, elect its own minister, and collect taxes to pay for the pastor's salary and upkeep of the church. Only those subscribing to the Puritan faith were to reside in the colony. Each church was also authorized to sanction members violating church rules. The government was to enforce provisions requiring every resident to attend services on the Sabbath as well as all fast days and days of thanksgiving. Magistrates were also reminded that their power and authority was "not for the restraining of churches, or any other good works, but for

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28. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*, 25.

29. David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy 1636-1638* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 312.



helping in and furthering thereof.”<sup>30</sup> The General Court made the formal statement part of the legal code.<sup>31</sup>

### *Half-Way Covenant*

Another major issue dividing the colony involved church membership. By the 1650s, many Puritans were concerned about how to sustain their true faith. Membership was limited to individuals who could demonstrate to the elders they had a personal relationship with Christ. Those who succeeded were considered one of God’s elect predestined to go to heaven. Over time, fewer people sought formal membership, including the baptized children of the members. This created a problem by the third generation. What to do with the children of these baptized nonmembers? The General Court called for a synod of the clergy and lay church members to resolve the dispute.

The synod of 1662 reached agreement in what is called the Half-Way Covenant. This agreement allowed children to be baptized and brought into the church as long as their parents recognized the “historic faith” of the church and demonstrated “outward conformity” with God’s teachings.<sup>32</sup> From a practical standpoint, the church retained the allegiance of the growing population. Otherwise, nonmembers may have challenged the church’s authority and looked elsewhere for religious consolation, possibly undermining the stability of the colony. The agreement did not, however, confer the right to vote in church or colonial elections because this was reserved for members in “full communion” with the church.<sup>33</sup> The General Court supported the agreement.<sup>34</sup>

### *Reformation Synod*

Another challenging issue that emerged in the 1670s involved the religiosity of the population. The clergy believed that the people were becoming less secure in their faith and more interested in

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30. *The Cambridge and Saybrook Platforms of Church Discipline, with the Confession of Faith of the New England Churches, Adopted in 1680*. Reprint from the collection of the New York Public Library (Lexington: HP, 2011), 65.

31. *Ibid.*, 8.

32. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*, 58.

33. Darren Staloff, *The Making of an American Thinking Class: Intellectuals and Intelligentsia in Puritan Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 140; Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*, 58.

34. Robert G. Pope, *The Half-Way Covenant: Church Membership in Puritan New England* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 53–54.

worldly pursuits, jeopardizing their covenant with God.<sup>35</sup> According to Increase Mather, the son of one of the early prominent ministers and a leading clergyman in his own right, what was needed was a new reformation. Mather petitioned the General Court for a synod in May 1679; the court agreed and convened a meeting in September of that year.

The synod sought to answer two questions: What were New Englanders doing to provoke God? How could they satisfy God? In answering the first question, the synod recounted what many clergy stated for more than a decade: the people had become spiritually complacent; there was a lack of discipline within society; and the populace was choosing material goods and pleasures over Godliness. This synod suggested that this decline in faith was a result of increases in gambling, swearing, drinking, the breaking of the Sabbath, and other indiscretions.<sup>36</sup>

To correct the breakdown in morality, church representatives urged the civil authorities to take an active role in promoting a reformation within New England. The synod identified a list of items for the magistrates to act upon—for instance, ensuring that church officers were fairly compensated and that meeting houses were properly maintained. The General Court was also instructed to enact and enforce laws that would promote a reformation. The item that received the most attention within the document was call for a renewal of the covenant.

Long an objective of Mather, the synod stated that renewing the colony's covenant was needed to divert the "impending wrath and judgment" of God.<sup>37</sup> The report added "now that clouds of wrath are hanging over these churches ... this consideration alone, might be enough to put us upon more solemn engagements unto the Lord our God."<sup>38</sup> The synod further stated that those churches

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35. Whether there was an actual decline in religiosity has been a point of contention among scholars. Although some accept the complaint of the Puritan clergy that later generations were falling away from the church, others suggest that this was a myth. Robert Pope in his study, *The Half-Way Covenant*, suggests that "declension," as it was called, was more a state of mind rather than reality. Pope asserts that churches actually experienced a revival in the latter part of the seventeenth century that resulted in an increase in church membership. For the purposes of this study, what is important is not whether declension occurred, but that the civil and religious leaders believed it was an issue that could affect the national covenant and took action.

36. Increase Mather, *The Necessity of Reformation With the Expedients Subservient Thereunto Asserted in Answer to Two Questions, I. What are the Evils That Have Provoked the Lord to Bring His Judgments on New England?* (Boston: John Foster, 1679), 2–9.

37. *Ibid.*, 12.

38. *Ibid.*, 13.

that had adopted covenant renewal had “experienced the presence of God with them.”<sup>39</sup> The use of these synods helped the clergy and colonial leaders defuse disputes that could have undermined the stability of the colony.

## Rituals and Sermons

The sermon was the clergy’s most important tool to preserve the covenant and maintain political and social order. Over time, the Puritan clergy developed a standard format for sermons urging renewal of the covenant through repentance. This format, known as jeremiad, was named after the ancient Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, who predicted the fall of Israel unless the Hebrews repented of their sins. The jeremiad contained three parts: a biblical reference that explored the Israelites’ violations of the covenant, an explanation of the duties and responsibilities connected to the covenant, and finally, an application of the text to the current situation with a plan for reform.<sup>40</sup> The congregational clergy used this format to interpret the signs of the times for the colonists and ensure action was taken to sustain the holy agreement.

Although format was important, it was more vital that the message of preserving the covenant be heard. Fortunately for the clergy, they had numerous opportunities to preach to the colonists. In addition to their weekly sermons, the ministers were called upon to speak at many government-sanctioned special events, such as Election Day celebrations, fasting and thanksgiving services, and annual Artillery Day festivities. Some of these events were not open to the general public but included the most powerful and prestigious residents within the colony. Each of these events further re-enforced the role of the minister as priest and prophet within the community.

### *Election Sermons*

One of the more important governmental functions ascribed to the Puritan clergy was the annual Election Day sermon in Massachusetts. First initiated in 1634, the governor and the magistrates selected a pastor to give a sermon on the day colonial officials were elected.<sup>41</sup> Being chosen to give this sermon was considered a high honor by the clergy and elected officials alike. Election Day

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39. Ibid., 14.

40. Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 29.

41. Lindsay Swift, *The Massachusetts Election Sermons; An Essay in Descriptive Bibliography* (Cambridge: John Wilson and Son University Press, 1897), 5.

was a holiday with pomp and ceremony as the church and state walked side-by-side in a procession to the meeting house where the minister gave his sermon.<sup>42</sup> Starting in the 1660s, the colonial leadership frequently paid to print and distribute the sermon throughout the colony.

The election sermon provided the clergy with an opportunity to influence political discourse and governance. Foremost, the sermon gave the clergy a platform for reminding the colonists of their special relationship with God. The minister frequently did so by drawing parallels between the Israelites' exodus from Egypt and their trek to the Promised Land to the experiences of the Puritans as they left England for the New World. In his 1668 sermon, William Stoughton re-enforced this message, stating that "God sifted a whole Nation that he might send choice grain over into this Wilderness."<sup>43</sup> To the Puritans, his meaning was clear: they were God's new chosen people.

The clergy also used the sermon to remind the magistrates of their duties and responsibilities to uphold the established order. In his 1638 sermon, Thomas Shepard urged voters to select honorable, wise, church-going men who would defend the current relationship because if you "ruin church you ruin state."<sup>44</sup> John Oxenbridge was more specific in his 1673 sermon. He told the magistrates that they represented "Christ the Judge of all the Earth" and that they were to use their power to "protect and promote what Christ hath appointed."<sup>45</sup> Stoughton further called the magistrates the "keepers of the vineyard," telling them they must be "very harsh and unpleasant" to prevent dissension and disorder within the church and state.<sup>46</sup>

One of the more mundane but practical uses associated with the election sermon was the ability of the clergy to affect the political process. Ministers could use the sermon to raise issues they felt should be on the colonial political agenda or influence the electoral outcome. Although the clergy were widely respected and influential, this latter use of the sermon was not always successful. In 1634, Cotton used his sermon to support the re-election of John Winthrop

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42. A. W. Plumstead, "An Introductory Essay," in *The Wall and the Garden: Selected Massachusetts Election Sermons, 1670-1775*, ed. A. W. Plumstead (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1968), 10.

43. William Stoughton, *New-England's True Interest Not to Lie* (Cambridge: S. G. and M. F., 1670), 19.

44. Thomas Shepard, "Election Sermon," *New England Historical and Genealogical Register* 24 (1870): 366.

45. Stoughton, *New-England's True Interest Not to Lie*, 19. Magistrates were individuals elected to Massachusetts Bay Colony's Upper Chamber, the Council of Assistants, who had the dual role of serving as legislators and interpreters/enforcers of the law (i.e., judges).

46. *Ibid.*, 33, 36.

as governor, only to have him defeated.<sup>47</sup> This option persisted until the 1670s when the sermon was given after the election.<sup>48</sup>

*Days of Humiliation and Thanksgiving Sermons*

The clergy and civil authorities worked closely to protect the religious well-being of their fellow colonists. As guardians of the faith, they sought to recognize God's role in their daily lives, particularly when they believed he was upset with them or blessed them with prosperity and safety. This recognition was often in the form of special days of humiliation or thanksgiving; these ritual services could be initiated by the clergy, the magistrates, or both.<sup>49</sup> The Puritans were required to attend church services on those days.

One aspect of fasting and thanksgiving sermons that made them very important was the frequency of the sermons. Whereas an Election Day sermon occurred once a year, days of fasting and thanksgiving could be called throughout the year. From 1632 to 1686, the Massachusetts General Court designated 53 days of humiliation and 29 days of thanksgiving.<sup>50</sup> The most prominent themes during the official fast days pertained to maintaining the covenant and social order, whereas the celebrations were generally in response to abundant harvests.<sup>51</sup>

Although the humiliation day sermons urged the people to repent their individual sins, the discourses could also be used to remind the congregation of their communal obligations before God. In Thomas Thacher's "A Fast of Gods Choosing" sermon, he admonished those in attendance to seek God's forgiveness and reminded them of their special relationship with God. "We are the people that do succeed Israel. We are Jacob. . . . We must do right and not forsake the Ordinances of our God."<sup>52</sup> The message was clear. Just as Jacob was the inheritor of God's covenant, so were they. To fulfill that obligation, the Puritans must as a community obey His laws (decrees that were to be enforced by God's magistrates).

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47. Swift, *The Massachusetts Election Sermons; An Essay in Descriptive Bibliography*, 6.

48. T. H. Breen, *The Character of the Good Ruler* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 284.

49. Richard Gildrie, *The Profane, the Civil, & the Godly: The Reformation of Manners in Orthodox New England, 1679-1749* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 113. Fasting is another term frequently used in lieu of humiliation.

50. Richard Gildrie, "The Ceremonial Puritan: Days of Humiliation and Thanksgiving," *NEHGR* 136 (1982): 16.

51. *Ibid.*, 6, 15; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England*, 171.

52. Thomas Thacher, *A Fast of Gods Choosing* (Boston: John Foster, 1678), 19.

The clergy and General Court did not always agree on when special days should be called. During the English Civil War, the clergy had a natural sympathy with the Puritan forces and wanted to call a number of fast days in support of the "Roundhead" forces. The court refused, however, feeling it more prudent to take a neutral approach to the outcome.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, in the 1670s when Increase Mather was urging the General Court to establish a day of fasting at the end of King Philip's War, the court declined and put forth a more positive day of thanksgiving in its place.<sup>54</sup>

Although days of humiliation focused on fasting, prayer, and confession, days of thanksgiving promoted joy, celebration, and feasts.<sup>55</sup> The most common theme of thanksgiving was an abundant harvest, which meant starvation and disease were more readily avoided.<sup>56</sup> In addition to giving thanks for their personal health, the Puritans praised God for protecting them from their enemies. After the conclusion of the skirmishes with the Pequot Indians in 1637, the General Court called for a "public thanksgiving to God for his great mercies in subduing the Pequots" and bringing the soldiers home safely.<sup>57</sup>

In general, fast days and days of thanksgiving publicly reaffirmed a belief in the covenant.<sup>58</sup> The rituals linked all events, whether good or bad, to the covenant and reminded the people that God would protect them if they obeyed his moral rules.<sup>59</sup> These government-sponsored events once more recognized the importance of the Puritan ministers as the moral interpreters of God's design for the colonists, including what actions must be taken to restore the covenant, if necessary.

### *Artillery Sermons*

A third prominent event where the ministers of Massachusetts supported the established order was the artillery sermon. The sermon was performed each year on the first Monday of June before the Honorable Artillery Company of Boston when the organization

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53. William DeLoss Love, *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1895), 158.

54. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England*, 172.

55. *Ibid.*, 166–71.

56. Gildrie, "The Ceremonial Puritan: Days of Humiliation and Thanksgiving," 14.

57. Love, *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England*, 135.

58. Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Discipline in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 155.

59. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England*, 170.

met to elect and install its officers. Chartered by the governor in 1638, the Artillery Company was responsible for training militia officers. On Artillery Election Day, the leading citizens, including the governor, colonial legislators, and many of the clergy, attended celebrations and parades, which were followed by a large banquet at the end of the day.<sup>60</sup>

To be chosen to deliver the Artillery Day sermon was a significant honor. Typically, the most prominent clergy—John Wilson, John Cotton, Richard Mather, and Thomas Shepard II—were selected to give the sermon. The sermons often addressed common themes: praising the militia for its role in protecting the colony, urging obedience to colonial rulers, mentioning the need for military preparedness, asserting the legitimacy of war, and affirming the fitness of being both a Christian and a soldier.<sup>61</sup> The importance of these sermons was to link the defense of the colony to the preservation of the covenant.

In his 1676 Artillery Day sermon, "The Heart Garrisoned," Samuel Willard echoed many of the previously mentioned themes as he urged the soldiers to be prepared for action. He borrowed religious imagery from the Bible, calling upon the soldiers to "get a shield of faith, a helmet of salvation, a girdle of truth, a breastplate of righteousness, the sword of the spirit... and learn how to use your arms."<sup>62</sup> Willard told the soldiers that Christ, their "Brave Commander," would ensure "your enemies are dead at your feet" if you remain true to him.<sup>63</sup> According to Willard, God's cause and the Puritan's cause were indivisibly linked.

With their sermons, the clergy ensured that the militia understood that the God who had led them through the wilderness to the Promised Land and that the God of morality and repentance was also a God of war. Just as He protected the Israelites from their enemies, he would protect his new chosen people, the Puritans, from their enemies. God was their general; they were His soldiers. As such, they needed to be prepared to follow Him when His enemies, and theirs, sought to harm them. The clergy assured the militia that with God at the head of their army, they were invincible.<sup>64</sup>

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60. Harold Mixon, "Boston's Artillery Election Sermons and the American Revolution," *Speech Monographs* 34, no. 1 (March 1967): 43–44.

61. John Alexander, "Colonial New England Preaching on War as Illustrated in Massachusetts Artillery Election Sermons," *Journal of Church and State* 17, no. 3 (1975): 425; Mixon, "Boston's Artillery Election Sermons and The American Revolution," 47–48.

62. Samuel Willard, *The Heart Garrisoned* (Cambridge: Samuel Green, 1676), 16.

63. *Ibid.*, 12, 20.

64. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*, 84.

The artillery sermons served a number of vital purposes. They gave legitimacy to the Godly state and its actions, thus warranting that the soldiers obey their rulers. The sermons also provided motivation and justification for the colonists to join the militia, become good soldiers, and fight on behalf of God and His people. Most importantly, the artillery sermons re-enforced the importance of the covenant between God and His people.

### Conclusion

The civil and religious leaders within the Massachusetts Bay Colony collaborated to establish and sustain a national covenant between the colony and God. This sacred pact was the foundation of Puritan society, influencing colonial governance, religion, and culture. The colonists expected God to provide them with peace and prosperity in exchange for following His ordinances. The two pillars devised and implemented a number of approaches for sustaining this divine agreement.

The state, invested with God's authority, used the legal code to define and update the covenant. The General Court regularly enacted laws to confront perceived moral failings among the people. The state also used its powers to intervene in religious disputes that could undermine internal unity, calling for synods of the clergy to resolve differences. In addition, the government protected the Puritan religious monopoly by barring competing religions that threatened religious uniformity. Maintaining social order was essential to preserving the covenant.

The clergy also played an active role in upholding the national covenant. The ministers served as God's intermediary with the people, interpreting the meaning of His words and events and instructing the colonists on how to appease Him. The most powerful tool in the clerical arsenal was the sermon. The clergy spoke so frequently about the covenant that they developed a standard format for such sermons, known as the jeremiad, which urged covenant renewal through contrition.

Additionally, the ministers participated in state-backed rituals that publicly underscored the importance of the covenant. In the Election Day and Artillery Day sermons, the ministers reminded the political elite of their sacred duty to faithfully carry out and defend the pact. On the special days of humiliation and thanksgiving, the ministers related the covenant to the tribulations suffered and blessings bestowed upon the colony. These special sermons re-enforced support for the covenant among all sectors.

The culmination of these joint church-state activities was a long-term partnership between the two pillars. This church-state



cooperation sustained the national covenant through the eighteenth century, while contributing to the emergence of a civil religion that made religious rhetoric, symbols, and rituals an integral part of Massachusetts politics. In addition, this civil-religious relationship contributed to Massachusetts emerging as a stable, self-governing entity that became the most powerful, prosperous, and influential province in New England.